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# DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

## NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS SECTION

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# THE ELDERLY IN THE GLOBAL COMMUNITY: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

In observance of International Day of the Elderly, 1 October 1992, **Mr. Joseph Verner Reed**, Under-Secretary-General for Public Affairs, United Nations; **H.E. Sedfrey A. Ordonez**, the former Permanent Representative of the Philippines to the United Nations; **Ms. Brigid Donelan**, Social Affairs Officer, Ageing Unit, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs (CSDHA), United Nations Office at Vienna; and **Mr. Gerardo Gonzalez**, Senior Technical Advisor on Ageing, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), briefed NGO representatives on issues concerning the world's elderly population.

## Ageing: a demographic revolution

**Mr. Joseph Verner Reed** spoke on behalf of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. He noted that by the year 2025, the world population would be triple that of 1950. The number of people aged 60 or above, however, would increase ten-fold. Each month, one million people turned 60, 80 per cent of whom lived in developing countries.

The ageing of populations was a demographic revolution, affecting the social, economic, and political structures of societies. The aged--currently totalling half a billion--were a minority most people would join, Mr. Reed said.

Mr. Reed noted that "The International Day for the Elderly" was first celebrated last year, and he called upon the NGO community to seize the occasion this year to express solidarity with the world's half a billion older citizens.

The Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing (adopted at the 1982 World Assembly on Ageing), and the United Nations Principles for Older Persons (adopted in 1991), provided guidelines for responding to the challenges of ageing. On 15 and 16 October 1992, the General Assembly would commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Plan's adoption. The Secretary-General had noted the important contributions made by NGOs in developing and implementing these guidelines.

Following a reading of his poem Ageing, **H.E. Sedfrey A. Ordonez** said there were no nursing homes in his country. In the Philippines, the elderly received care from their families, who considered it their filial responsibility. It was the warmth of the family which preserved the quality of elderly life, he said.

## Implementing the International Plan of Action on Ageing

**Ms. Brigid Donelan** discussed the progress which had been made in addressing the needs of the elderly since the adoption of the International Plan of Action on Ageing in 1982. The Plan was adopted by representatives of 124 Member States, with the participation of non-governmental organizations, at the World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna. The Plan enumerated principles and recommendations for meeting the needs of the elderly and for ensuring their full participation in society and development.

Ms. Donelan named several mechanisms established to implement the Plan's goals:

- **The Banyan Fund Association: A World Fund for Ageing** was created in 1991 to promote self-help initiatives by the elderly, their families, and their communities.
- **The African Gerontology Society**, formed in 1989, was a regional programme on ageing.
- **The International Institute on Ageing** was founded in 1988 and was based in Malta. The Institute provided technical services, researched demographic and developmental questions, and fostered ties between developed and developing nations. The Dominican Republic had suggested establishing a similar institute to serve the needs of Latin American and Caribbean nations.
- **The United Nations Principles for Older Persons**, adopted in 1991, affirmed the right of the elderly to independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity.
- In 1990, the United Nations General Assembly designated 1 October as the **International Day for the Elderly**, to focus world attention on the elderly. "E"-Day was first observed last year, in over 50 countries.

## Draft global targets on ageing

The General Assembly had also proposed eight global targets on ageing for the year 2001. These included: assisting countries to set national goals on ageing; integrating ageing into national and international development plans and programmes; promoting community-based care of older persons; standardizing the terminology and methodology of research on the ageing; establishing a global network of senior volunteers for economic and social development; and promoting closer cooperation among NGOs and among inter-governmental organizations on ageing. Activities on ageing would be integrated with those planned for other social development issues, such as: the World Conference on Human Rights (1993); the International Year of the Family (1994); the International Conference on Population and Development (1994); the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995); the tenth anniversary of International Youth Year (1995); and the Ninth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (1995).

In 2001, ten percent of the world's population would be 60 years of age or older. In some areas of the world, the 60-and-above age-group would comprise 25 percent of the population. Over half of the world's elderly currently lived in developing countries, and more than half of the world's older persons were women.

**Other United Nations activities on ageing**

While the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, in Vienna, served as the focal point within the United Nations for all ageing-related activities, over 20 United Nations bodies and agencies had been active on ageing. The Department of Public Information had prepared a press kit on ageing; the 1991 United Nations World Population Monitoring Report focused on changing population age structures; and a special issue on population ageing and the situation of elderly persons, an adjunct to the 1991 Demographic Yearbook, would be issued next year. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) supported much research on ageing, including a study on the "Developmental implications of demographic change"; the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements was preparing "Guidelines for improving the housing and living conditions of the elderly and the disabled in human settlements management and development"; and the International Labour Organization (ILO) had issued two publications: Training for older people: A Handbook and ILO and the Elderly. In 1993, the ILO would publish a study on "Older Workers: Conditions of Work and Transition to Retirement". The World Health Organization (WHO) conducted a global research programme on dementia, osteoporosis, immunological changes and successful ageing; and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) continued to work on retirement preparation, curriculum development, and student participation at "Third Age Universities". In addition, the United Nations Postal Administration (UNPA) was introducing a postmark to commemorate International Day for the Elderly.

**Ageing and population: the role of UNFPA**

**Mr. Gerardo Gonzalez** pointed out that the United Nations viewed population ageing as an achievement, the result of new methods in reducing child mortality and prolonging life. The increasing number of older people was due to demographic transition, a process through which societies pass from an initial stage of low life expectancy and high fertility (young population), to a final stage characterized by high life expectancy and low fertility (older population). In this process, a sustained decline in mortality was followed by decreased fertility. The faster the decline in mortality and the longer the period between mortality decline and fertility decline, the faster the population grew during that transitional phase.

Demographic transition started later and had been much faster in developing countries than in developed countries.

In response to the world population explosion of the 1950s and 1960s, the United Nations had created institutions such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). UNFPA's mandate was to help governments develop policies on population and curb population growth.

There had been great progress in the area of family planning. From the late 1960s to the 1990s, the percentage of couples in developing countries using family planning had jumped from 14 to 51 per cent--the rate varied in other regions of the world, as did the speed of change. In nations with strong population policies backed by the government, fertility reduction was faster and population growth slower. Globally, the average number of children per family had dropped from six to four.

The world was currently in the middle of a demographic transition that would stabilize in about 150 years at approximately 11.5 billion people. By that time, one-fourth of the population would be 65 years or older. Mr. Gonzalez predicted that a large number of the world's poor would be living in the urban areas of developing countries. Many of them would be elderly, presenting a challenge for the future.

Mr. Gonzalez said that attention should be paid to the distribution of income and opportunities among the world's elderly. Their uneven distribution would increase the number of low-income, unskilled, elderly urban residents, who would be unable to support themselves. The UNFPA was currently supporting studies which sought the most suitable development strategies to prevent these potential problems.